

Arab Public Opinion

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Introduction

Almost all Arab polls show widespread disapproval of American policies, both in Iraq and in the Arab-Israeli arena -- and negative overall images of the U.S., especially since we went to war in Iraq. On the brighter side, there is some polling evidence that certain Arab publics increasingly reject terrorism (except against Israelis); continue to voice support for democracy, at least in principle; and feel that a clash of Muslim civilization against the West is not inevitable.

My hope is to find a way forward from this point of departure -- but first just a moment on the historical background. Serious political polling in Arab countries is relatively recent, dating back only to the Gulf crisis of 1990/91. From a research perspective, we have come a pretty long way since then. Yet some lessons I learned the hard way back then are still very valid today.

First, we need to take these polls seriously -- but also take them with a few grains of salt. They are at best just imperfect snapshots of what people are willing to say to strangers, and we may not be so adept at understanding what exactly it is that they are trying to tell us, or what they may be choosing not to say at all. Second, we need to pay as much attention to the differences among and within Arab publics as to sweeping generalizations about Arab public opinion.

Third, we need to think hard about the "so what" questions: How much does the Arab street matter, compared to the elite? How much do these autocratic governments really care about public opinion? If they do, have they already adjusted their policies to take popular attitudes into account, or is it possible that we know more about what the political traffic will bear than they do? How will people's attitudes affect their actual behavior, if at all? For example, while it is clear that unfavorable views of American intervention in Iraq are even more widespread today than they were during the 1991 Gulf crisis, we have seen nowhere near the kind of massive protest demonstrations around the major Arab capitals that were witnessed in that earlier episode. These are all complicated and important questions -- and analyzing the numbers is just the beginning.

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